

# Conscience and Consciousness in *The Ambassadors*: Episte- mology, Focalization, and Narrative Ethics

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Roderick Hudson's declaration "I am a Hellenist; I am not a Hebraist!" (RH 94) reflects in Arnoldian terms his determination to be ruled by Hellenism's "*spontaneity of consciousness*" rather than Hebraism's "*strictness of conscience*" (Arnold 467).<sup>1</sup> Though gesturing toward a separation between these two critical terms and attitudes in his earliest published novel, Henry James later draws on the fertile overlap between conscience and consciousness in orienting narrative ethics. Through the 1880s and 1890s, he devotes increasing attention to the interior consciousness of his protagonists and to the communication of this consciousness via focalization—mediating and limiting narrative point of view through a character's point of view. By his final *trivium*, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), narrative consciousness sometimes verges on individual consciousness, perhaps most thoroughly in Lambert Strether, the protagonist and focalizer of *The Ambassadors*. In *The Ambassadors*, narrative consciousness squeezes into—is refracted and focalized through—what Percy Lubbock early recognized as "Strether's intervening consciousness" (170), or what James's narrator characterizes as Strether's "double consciousness" (AB 18). Conscience, too, features prominently in this novel, both as the particularly moral aspect of consciousness and as a reflection of James's strict New England moral sensibilities, as Austin Warren observes. But while Strether's consciousness, associated with his irrepressible conscience, forms the novel's focal point, moral impositions in the narrative are not his alone. Entwined, "conscience" and "consciousness" in *The Ambassadors*, beyond destabilizing the novel's epistemology, more specifically foreground the solipsistic torque of the narrator's focalization on the novel's ethics.

The question of how James communicates morality and ethics has generated some recent forceful criticism by the likes of Robert Pippin, Martha Nussbaum, and J. Hillis Miller (*Literature*), the first two on ethics in *The Ambassadors* in particular. It is between the last two, however, that I want to examine a critical lacuna, suggesting a companion—and complementary—view. While Miller's emphasis on speech acts in Henry James figures the narrative itself as an ethical act, Nussbaum sees reading, in James especially, as "a preparation for a life that is lived at one remove from life" (188). Nussbaum's emphasis on the importance of "perception" and "reflection" in ethics is very close to my own, but I want to extend an observation of hers, coming closer to Miller's position of the intrinsic ethic activity of narrative. Nussbaum claims, in the context of what she calls "open-ended inquiry" through Strether, "that procedures themselves are value-laden" (186). I examine James's procedure of focalization as a way—not necessarily of a reader's perceiving (as Nussbaum) or of a narrator's enacting (as Miller)—but of a narrator's and a character's together creating consciousness attentive to, and gripped by, ethics.

Beyond presenting the narrative through Strether's viewpoint, the narrator emphasizes repeatedly—through the use of reflexive pronouns, verbs of perception, and counterfactual musings like "as if"—that Strether's consciousness is not just perceived but imagined, even created. Concordantly, narrative focalization foregrounds the radically subjective force not only in Strether's consciousness but also in his conscience, presenting moral dilemmas as uniquely individual. Beyond depicting the power and longevity of Strether's individual conscience, the narrative, in its often restricted focalization through him, mobilizes ethics only insofar as he has perceived and conceived the world. What Strether does not realize in his consciousness can hardly influence his conscience: even so, what the narrator does not focalize through Strether bears little on the novel's ethics. I do not propose that James's narrator is necessarily or altogether ethical or that the narrator has an ethical axe to grind. On the contrary, I emphasize how narrative focalization makes ethics central for the characters and then how ethics is created within the minds of those characters.

Some description of focalization at the outset will illuminate more precisely its potency in framing and mediating consciousness and conscience, epistemology and ethics.<sup>2</sup> While Wayne Booth explores the division between narrator and "implied author" in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, structuralist narratologists, who did much to develop the study of focalization, investigate the distance between "teller" and "seer," specifically giving room for a focalizer. Rather than interpreting the "intention" and "meaning" of a story through the chain of author, implied author, narrator, or character, focalization mediates the "intention" of a story primarily through author, narrator, focalizer, and character, thereby centering the bulk of interpretation between narrator and character—with focalizer as a crux between the two—rather than between author and narrator. While a single point of view for Booth might accurately describe a story's orientation, structuralist narratology asserts the importance of at least two points of view—that of the focalizer, who sees the action, and that of the narrator, who sees and reports the seer—to cooperate or even to compete in the communication of a story. Perhaps more fundamentally, Booth's inquiry into what the author "meant" becomes a more singular quest to explore narrative method.

Scholars of narrative have long proposed a split between the narrative functions of seeing, via a focalizer, and telling, via a narrator. Whereas the narrator in

traditional fiction most often functions as seer of the action as well as teller, focalization separates the narrative operations of telling and seeing. “[V]erbs of perception, cognition, and emotion,” are “used to signal the active, ongoing deciphering of what is being narrated,” explains David Herman, “its refraction through some character-perceiver’s or character-knower’s perspective” (308). In focalization, James stretches the third-person narrator beyond more traditional, singularly omniscient or limited perspectives, mediating a third-person narrator’s story from the limited perspective of a character. As in the case of first-person narration, the sections of *The Ambassadors* focalized through Strether restrict knowledge to a single character, but, unlike the first-person narrator, the focalizer does not retain control of his objects or moments of perception.

Shortly after he arrives in Europe as the “ambassador” of the title to retrieve Chad Newsome for his mother, Strether himself is described through the focalization of his incipient romantic interest, Maria Gostrey. James’s narrator foregrounds a deeply subjective kind of focalization by penetrating beyond what (a) “his hostess saw,” to (b-c) “what she *might have taken in* with a vision kindly adjusted . . .” (20, emphasis mine). To employ Nieragden’s modification of Bal’s and Genette’s classification systems: the narrator deftly transitions from (a) “figural exoperceptive” narration, focusing via a character’s perception, to (b) “narratorial exoperceptive” narration, focusing via the narrator’s perspective, which simultaneously presents the narrator’s imagination of (c) “figural isoperceptive” narration, focusing via a character’s potentially self-reflexive perspective (695). Following Gostrey’s perception of Strether, the narrator describes her actions (“She waited for him”) and correspondingly describes her through Strether’s own focalization: “his *consciousness* of it [Gostrey’s ‘perfect plain propriety’] was instantly acute” (20, emphasis mine). In both of these cases, as is common through the novel, Strether is described not directly by the narrator but by the narrator’s report of another’s view, or by Strether’s own self-reflection.

While J. Hillis Miller chides some scholars of narrative who “take more delight in subtle refinements of distinction among various forms of ‘focalization’ than in demonstrating how these formal features are related to meaning” (“Focalization” 125), his critique serves predominantly to refine and extend the work of narratology. James, with a similar emphasis on practical meaning and technique in his preface to *The Golden Bowl*, describes his focalizing characters as “the impersonal author’s concrete deputy or delegate” (xli), seeing them as a way for him to “get down into the arena and do my best to live and breathe and rub shoulders and converse with the persons engaged in the struggle” (xliii). Despite the complex vocabulary that has grown up around narratology and focalization, as suggested in Nieragden’s terms (or Bal’s, which Nieragden is refining), much of its usefulness emerges, at its most concrete level, from specific textual indicators such as verb types (as in Miss Gostrey’s above focalization), descriptions of “consciousness” (as in Strether’s above focalization), and other stylistic elements. The attention to pronouns, distancing language, verb mood and tense involves close stylistic analysis—and its emphasis on minutiae of language and syntax—with narratological analysis, giving greater precision to narratology and greater scope for stylistics.

Using stylistics as a manner of assessing narrative technique may seem unduly cavalier, positing wide-ranging claims about entire texts’ narrative structures with small bits of evidence. Perhaps as dangerously, this method may seem to offer distinct, even

diverging, inquiries into James, paired only at the expense of interpretive consistency. J. Hillis Miller's study of speech acts as ethical indicators in *Literature as Conduct*<sup>3</sup> offers ample illustration, however, of the power—ethical and otherwise—of single words and phrases threaded through a Jamesian text. In his analysis of *The Wings of the Dove*, for example, Miller argues convincingly for the importance of the phrase “There you are!” and the even briefer interjection, “Oh!” “It is so rich in meaning and in ambiguous performative force that each ‘Oh!’” he reasons, “might require an interminable commentary” (199). While attending specifically to the performative potency of language, Miller indicates further significant facets of the phrase “There you are!,” noting that it “puts together a deictic, a pronoun shifter, and a present tense version of the verb *to be* to make an exceedingly ambiguous and untranslatable idiom” (195). Beyond the ambiguities of deixis and pronoun that Miller observes, this phrase also identifies a particular point of view and, given the frequent exclamation mark, a particular attitude regarding that point of view. Outside of denoting a Jamesian narrator's point of view, “There you are!” highlights a particular character's perspective, orienting the unnamed “here” by the position of the speaker. Strether's exclamation “Then there we are!” to end *The Ambassadors* (365), furthermore, while shifting to a plural, first-person pronoun, indicates an agreement only that Maria and he must differ so long as Strether, and his conscience, have the final word.

As Miller and many others like Ian Watt and Terry Eagleton have recognized, James often communicates his multifaceted point of view via a complex network of small-scale linguistic structures.<sup>4</sup> “A narrating situation is,” Genette writes, “a complex whole within which analysis, or simply description, cannot *differentiate* except by ripping apart a tight web of connections among the narrating act, its protagonists, its spatio-temporal determinations, its relationship to the other narrating situations involved in the same narrative” (215). As Genette suggests, stylistics contributes perhaps most noticeably to James's “narrating act” in that the details of phrasing and sentence structure in communication reveal something of the “spatio-temporal determinations,” orientation, and perspective of the storyteller. Through his deployment of carefully wrought micro-changes in stylistics, sentence structures, and simile, James's narrative technique in his later fiction creates a shifting dynamism between his narrator and focalizing characters. This focalization in turn registers or refracts macro-changes initiated by Strether's geographic displacement, conflict with society's mores, feelings of guilt, and his exploration of fuller experience, as reflected in his important speech to Little Bilham.

Two contrasting examples, in late and early James respectively, illustrate the impact of stylistics on narrative focalization. In *The Golden Bowl*, for example, when the Prince “found himself believing that, really, futility would have been forgiven him” (13). Stylistic elements—the narrator's reflexive pronoun (“himself”), verb of sensation (“found”), and subjunctive mood (“would have been”)—inform the narrative distance between narrator and focalizer, inasmuch as the Prince's own actions are reported not directly by the narrator, but indirectly by the narrator only as they have been processed in the mind of the Prince. In James's earlier *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), by contrast, the narrator normally does not focalize information through another character. Even when Lord Warburton is doubtlessly evaluating Isabel Archer's physical beauty, the narrator reports only that “he may have been mistaken at this point” (254), an assertion of uncertainty that could have been undergirded by a more

complex, subjective narrative framework of focalization. Had James added an infinitive and a reflexive pronoun in the phrase “he supposed/thought/considered himself to have been mistaken,” for instance, he could further have distanced his narrator from the action and refracted certainty through another character.

Analyzing textual details in this minute, language-focused mode suggests shared methodologies between narrative structuralism and, argues Dan Shen, poetry. “The stylistic analysis of prose fiction is not much different from the stylistic analysis of poetry,” Shen asserts (139). “Narratological analysis of prose fiction has departed from the poetic analytical tradition, focusing attention on the relation between story events and their rearrangement.” Nonetheless, Shen proposes reintegrating the types of analysis often reserved in contemporary criticism respectively for prose and poetry. This emphasis on stylistics and minutiae of language in examining focalization, furthermore, helps anchor the potentially, and potentially dangerously, ethereal inquiries into James’s epistemology and its specific inflection in ethics.

Epistemology emerges in the opening sentences of *The Ambassadors*, as Strether’s ignorance and consequent surprise do not make him “wholly disconcerted” (17) at the end of sentence one and a telegram makes his plans “sound” by the end of sentence two. Further description of characters’ (especially Strether’s) consciousnesses, thought processes, and reasoning foregrounds the interior world of the mind and epistemology throughout the novel. Beyond characters’ perspectives and thoughts, the narrator makes reference to perspectives not identified with any character but potential, anonymous, counterfactual. In the above-quoted initial description of Strether focalized through Maria, for instance, the narrator reports not just “what his hostess saw” but “what she *might have taken in* with a vision kindly adjusted . . .” (20, emphasis mine). The verbs of sensation (“saw,” “taken in”) and the subjunctive mood (“might have”), more than signaling distance between narrator and focalizer, indicate the fabricating power of narrative epistemology, particularized in character consciousness.

The phrase “as if” in *The Ambassadors* similarly signals a narrative shift into imagined, counterfactual perception, collapsing the trigger of simile (“as”) into the subjunctive verb mood. One of the hallmarks of the literary imagination, simile encases imagined reality in the language of tangible phenomena, fabricating a substitute for reality. In Strether’s conversation with Chad’s secret beloved, Madame de Vionnet, in Book Nine, for instance, the narrator recalls that they “talked most conveniently—*as if* they had had no chance yet” (264). Two sentences later, the narrator similarly elides simile with counterfactual: “She made him,” James writes, “*as* under the breath of some vague western whiff, homesick and freshly restless” (264). The phrase “as if” initially functions as a focalization of experience through some possible viewer, not necessarily character or narrator. But “as if” in this chapter ultimately produces a world fabricated in Strether’s consciousness. When Strether just earlier in the scene sees Sarah Pocock’s name and address, it is “*as if* he had been looking hard into her mother’s face, and he turned from it *as if* the face had declined to relax. But since it was in a manner *as if* Mrs. Newsome were thereby all the more, instead of the less, in the room, and were *conscious*, sharply and solely *conscious*, of *himself*, so he *felt* both held and hushed, summoned to stay at least and take his punishment” (259–60, emphasis mine). The “as ifs” turn this focalization from the actual into the potential, the subjectively fabricated. While Strether distances himself from Sarah’s abrasive presence, a proxy for his stifling patron Mrs. Newsome’s, the consciousness he constructs

makes him ever more aware of Mrs. Newsome's virtual presence. Perhaps because of the vague perceptions of external reality, his interior perceptions intensify—uncovered and therefore emphasized through focalization. Further, as his consciousness is sharpened, his conscience, his moral sensitivity, makes him stay for his “punishment,” however subjectively conceived. The sheer arbitrariness of his conscience emphasizes its power, intensified rather than diffused by his perception of exterior phenomena, additionally underlining the far-reaching effects of focalized simile.

Perhaps as an antidote or counterweight to the superabundant mental events, James's characters focus on physical objects to orient their minds, but, even then, James emphasizes the necessary element of subjective perception and fabrication. Like Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*, who considers how “the smallest things, the faces, the hands, the jewels of the women, the sound of words, especially of names, across the table, the shape of the forks, the arrangement of the flowers, the attitude of the servants, the walls of the room, were all touches in a picture and denotements in a play” (149), Strether fashions his own drama when considering Maria Gostrey's red velvet band. When Strether conscientiously catches “himself in the act” of perceiving this band, it becomes “a starting-point for fresh backward, fresh forward, fresh lateral flights” (AB 43). If the narrator were also the focalizer here, the mode usual for contemporary fiction, the narrative might perhaps pass over these memories and speculations. Strether's focalizing mind, however, takes a turn into some of these backward and forward “flights,” which present new perspectives and ways of seeing, particularly, Strether's own. These flights are, to the narrator, *speculations* (I emphasize the Latin root), but for Strether, new *perspectives*, literally a “looking-through” to new possibilities, to alternative and counterfactual consciousness.

While it is doubtful that Strether's reveries on Gostrey could be of much use to the plot or structure of the narrative, they interrupt the narrative structure so that as the story has moved in story-time from past to future it has also shifted and disoriented his sense of concrete time as “all sorts of things in fact now seemed to come over him. . . . It came over him for instance that Miss Gostrey looked perhaps like Mary Stuart” (43, 44). This circuitous reflection summons a historical figure without direct narrative allusion or character's speech, revealing a unique side of Strether's knowledge and experience rather than a highbrow narrator or pretentious character. Given Strether's recollection in the previous paragraph that he had likened his imperious patron Mrs. Newsome to England's Queen Elizabeth, his tacit comparison of Gostrey to the sixteenth-century Scottish Queen Mary Stuart must seem anything but off-hand. These paired, contemporary, historical references—parallel in Strether's mind to the two iconic women in his own life—summon a sixteenth-century world, complete with dueling monarchs. Beyond emblematically introducing these dominant women, Strether's world-creating references reveal the utterly solipsistic—and solipsizing—power of his consciousness.

In addition to building an alternate epistemology, a virtual world, through subjunctives and other counterfactuals, focalization affects epistemology and individual consciousness in its interplay with narrative limitation and uncertainty. “For James, what we call knowledge can only be a function of how we look at our experience, and how we look at the looking of others,” observes Peter Rawlings. “He constructs limited centers of consciousness not only as an acknowledgement of this, but as the very means of dramatizing the processes involved” (45). James's insertion of an ex-



tra mediator between the knowledge of action and the telling of that action further refracts the communication of that knowledge. And, since that refraction occurs in a limited character's consciousness and not in an omniscient narrator or creator-author, the knowledge may be less than complete not just because the author or narrator chooses not to communicate the knowledge but perhaps because the character is unaware or unsure of that knowledge. The question of "who knows what" in James, perhaps more than the simpler "what is known," therefore functions centrally in his epistemology and its communication.

Like *The Ambassadors* in its focalizing complexity, *The Golden Bowl*, carved into two books named after and focalized principally through the "Prince" and "Princess," displays in its very construction the partition between and among the "whos" and their knowledge, between individual consciousness and more general epistemology. While the opening of the novel records the Prince's expansive thoughts about London's relation to royal Rome, as he thinks of "*Imperium*" and the "loot of far-off victories" (3), the princess first focalizes ("that was what she had felt") her own restrictive reflections of "her existence in the space left her for circulation, a space that sometimes seemed ample and sometimes narrow" (299). The splits in perspective proliferate beyond these two characters, however, illustrating the power and mystery of varied epistemologies.

In a description of Charlotte Stant in chapter 3, for instance, the narrator's bland and nearly hostile description of Charlotte's face as "too narrow and long" contrasts with the Prince's description of her: "He knew her narrow hands, he knew her long fingers and the shape and colour of her finger-nails, he knew her special beauty of movement and line when she turned her back, and the perfect working of all her main attachments, that of some wonderful finished instrument, something intently made for exhibition, for a prize" (35–36). While the narrator launches into a quick and comprehensive critique, listing grievances against her face, eyes, and mouth in the first sentence of description, the Prince at first takes up only one item at a time: her "thick hair," her "free arms," and then her "narrow hands," as quoted above. Not until he has remarked on some figures in detail will the Prince move into this more comprehensive and yet compact description of Charlotte, suggesting that he has taken more time to examine or to comment on her than has the narrator. Still further, the narrator proposes a fictional focalizer to view the father, Adam Verver, who "might have been observed to open the door of the billiard-room with a certain freedom" (92). The subjunctive mood ("might have been"), while complicating the narrative structure, more importantly adds a non-existent focalizer's perspective, an external and indefinable mind, to the circulation of knowledge. While James's reflexive pronouns most often affirm characters' self-knowledge, the subjunctive mood, significant in *The Ambassadors* as in *The Golden Bowl*, occludes knowledge of perspective and therefore of the possibility of knowing the postulated focalizer's reliability. These combating products of his focalization manifest an intrinsic ambiguity in James's particular late style of focalization, proceeding into characters' minds but then deflecting that ingress in diverging and sometimes indiscernible directions.<sup>5</sup>

Taking interpretation of James perhaps one more step, beyond physically non-existent focalizers, Ruth Yeazell posits the importance of the nonexistent or excluded discourse. "What the characters refuse to talk about, what they refuse even to think," she argues, "becomes for us—especially in retrospect—the real substance of James's

fiction" (129). This plethora of "events" located in characters' consciousnesses often clutters the characters' minds, further complicating the novels' epistemologies. Rather than remaining a problem of the text, an epistemology resulting from James's multifarious narrative perspectives and focalizations impinges on readers too, implicating them in the focalizing experience and the characters' consequent uncertainties. "To read the late novels is at least temporarily to share some of that bewilderment," Yeazell asserts. "For like the characters, we too are continuously forced to hover somewhere between ignorance and full knowledge, to struggle with intimations and possibilities which make themselves obliquely felt" (35; see also Prince 49). Even in Strether's famed speech to Little Bilham, propagating what Robert Pippin calls "a very broad, somewhat vague ethic" (158), the direct address seems hardly restricted to Bilham but protrudes into narrative didacticism. Given James's revelation that the theme of this speech provided a kernel for the novel, Strether's emphatic "*you*" might resonate as some sort of authorial didacticism as well (AB 137). Directly following this speech, Strether's assumption of what Pippin calls "the perspective of an other" (161) through his use of French reflects his own multiple perspectives. "*Impayable*, as you say, no doubt. But what am I to myself?" (AB 138). Questioning even the foundational law of identity ( $X=X$ ), Strether reflects for the reader a tergiversated consciousness and epistemology.

Aside from this direct address, potentially transferable to readers, the mental gymnastics of James's characters give another model of transferable consciousness, as, for example, in the nearly supernatural communication of knowledge between Strether and Madame de Vionnet. Even in the midst of an exchange, the narrator registers the conversation's impact on both of them: "The [verbal] picture at any rate stirred in her an appreciation that he felt to be sincere" (241). How precisely Strether physically discovers her "appreciation" remains unknown, for the narrator reports how he "felt," as epistemology skips from a perceptible to an emotional component. Rather than operating within an epistemology informed by the narrator's comfortably detached perspective, James probes the singular perspectives and consciousnesses of his characters. Even as James's narrator through focalization enters their minds, themselves fictional fabrications, these minds also are seen to construct fictions, metaphors, and counterfactual worlds. In these focalized worlds, actualized through the unspoken speech of imagination, conscience, rather than anything external, becomes the solitary ethical standard.

In a scene almost entirely focalized through Strether in the Luxembourg Gardens in Book Two, chapter 2, the narrator pinpoints the radically interiorized operations of Strether's conscience, in both the near and distant past. In reviewing his recent time ashore, he recalls that "more than once, during the time, he had regarded himself as admonished" (AB 60). Rather than referring directly to society's censure or to some external standard, Strether centers his conscience on his own regard of his actions. Reaching further into the past, he brings his past marriage and deceased son into conscience's sphere: "That the memory of the vow of his youth should, in order to throb again, have had to wait for this last, as he felt it, of all his accidents—that was surely proof enough of how his conscience had been encumbered" (64). Strether implies that his marriage should enjoin throbs of conscience, but the precise reasons for this remain veiled. Later in the same paragraph, however, the narrator reports that, in the most recent past, Strether's "conscience had been amusing itself for the forty-



eight hours by forbidding him the purchase of a book" (65). Yet for this comparative triviality, Strether's reasoning seems quite clear: "he held off from that, held off from everything; from the moment he didn't yet call on Chad he wouldn't for the world have taken any other step." Strether ties this internal paralysis to his ignorance of Chad's situation; and, concordantly, this paralysis incites his protracted analysis of his conscience and motivations. Strether's ethics—and the narrative's—are determined by what Strether makes of events rather than by the seriousness of the events themselves.

Strether's analysis of his conscience emerges and remains principally within his unstable conception of himself, as evidenced in the frequent reflexive pronouns and the verbs of perception that litter the middle section of this chapter: "He felt" (61), "It seemed" (62), "He appeared to himself," "He could easily see," "he considered," "He judged" (63), "He had believed" (64), "Strether had become acquainted," "He remembered." As these verbs focalize the experience of the action through Strether, they limit the viewpoint to perhaps the novel's most naïve character. One formula in particular—"He appeared to himself"—showcases the instability of Strether's consciousness. The narrator in this clause reports not just Strether's perceptions, but a perception of Strether's own perceptions, a doubly-inflected focalization that extends the activity of perception past the narrator's focalizing to Strether himself. Even Strether's own self-knowledge can only "appear" to him, revealing an epistemological wariness symptomatic of a consciousness working overtime. His uncertainty in reporting his own state further indicates, beyond an attendance on fact-checking, an obsession with truthful reporting, an effect of conscience that also is clocking extra hours.

Fusing a third-person narrative voice with first-person point of view in his focalization through Strether, James associates narrative consciousness and personal conscience, adding an automatic moral component to narrative technique, drawing consciousness into conscience's vortex. As Strether hears of Madame de Vionnet's arrangement of marriage for her daughter Jeanne, for example, his "consciously gaping a little" (251) supplies a physical manifestation of his shocked conscience, purveyed via his "conscious" facial expression. Here, conscience molds the disposition of consciousness. Even at the end of the novel, Strether's rejection of Maria Gostrey and European luxury betrays his conscience's resurgent force. By focalizing through a character whose moral sensitivity remains intact, if shaken, James's narrator purveys Strether's conscience as a persistent moral presence. As his point of view and consciousness become the narrative focus, furthermore, Strether's conscience becomes the monolithic, if not solitary, moral perspective in the novel. In contrast to the permissive ethics of Maria or Madame de Vionnet, the narrator's focus on Strether's ethics, by the novel's concluding conversation, reflexively refocuses the narrative into concern for duty and the "right."

In the novel's final page, Strether and Maria's verbal jousting over the nuances of "right" highlights the language of casuistry, a formulaic process for classifying and deciding cases of conscience. Done with quibbling over peccadilloes like "the purchase of a book" (65), Strether engages in degrees of casuistry he would not have dared months earlier, his greater dexterity in moral argument accompanying his more expansive consciousness. While Maria emphasizes Strether's potential gain—"There's nothing," she says, "I wouldn't do for you"—Strether responds in the language of ethics: "But all the same I must go. . . . To be right" (365). Her stichomythia, "To be right?" delivered with "vague deprecation," reveals her futile attempt to undercut

Strether's conscience, his sense and definition of right. "That, you see, is my only logic. Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself," he explains, his reference to moral logic and insistent stichomythia suggesting his recourse to casuistry and conscience.<sup>6</sup> Strether's precise reasons for rejecting Maria's virtual proposal of marriage, while somewhat obscure, reveal his priority of private conscience and the self, self-control, and self-denial.

While noting James's emphasis on "right," Martha Nussbaum claims that "*The Ambassadors* and some parts of *The Golden Bowl* seem too preoccupied with getting it right, too much still in the grip of the demand for fine awareness and rich responsibility, to welcome love, with its exclusivity and its tumult, as a nourishing influence in the ethical life" (53). Somewhat contrary to Nussbaum's emphasis on an admittedly "silent world of love" that must be perceived "around the margins of the novel" (52), Robert Pippin explains the potential of Strether's more austere self-renunciation in this scene. In denying material gain, Strether "ends up both with nothing," Pippin reasons, "and yet with everything, the logic of being right and therewith having 'his own life'" (167–68). Pippin's explication of Strether's "double consciousness" allows room for a consciousness unfulfilled at one point but satisfied regarding ethical matters of conscience. Even if Strether's consciousness has expanded through his experiences in Europe by the novel's conclusion, conscience governs, and perhaps surprisingly complements, its enjoyment of that experience. For Strether, the status of consciousness and conscience are directly related: greater conscious experience evokes, even demands, profounder conscience.

While useful in charting Strether's developing sense of ethics and discerning the specifically ethical component of consciousness, the distinction between conscience and consciousness is hardly airtight. Historically, "conscience" in the early modern period had denoted both a moral sense of right and wrong and "consciousness," or personal self-knowledge, more generally, and some terminological overlap continued into the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The connection between these terms extends beyond obvious philological similarity to an underlying philosophical debate from Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, and Hume, to the French *philosophes*, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. "Conscience-consciousness," Edward Engelberg asserts, "constitutes a major dialectic, probed and refined in the course of the last three centuries" (*Distance* 15). In James's lifetime, Nietzsche connected conscience and consciousness:

the consciousness of this rare freedom, the power over oneself and over fate, has in his case penetrated to the profoundest depths and become instinct, the dominating instinct. What will he call this dominating instinct, supposing he feels the need to give it a name? The answer is beyond doubt: this sovereign man calls it his *conscience*. (496)

The very point of specifying this connection between conscience and consciousness in James's narration is, however, contrary to Nietzsche's emphasis on the "sovereign man," to explore the extent of narrative sovereignty. In Nietzsche, conscience and consciousness carry and imply intrinsic human authority. In James's narrative, by contrast, the narrator controls all perception and hence all access to conscience—in both its senses.

As conscience and consciousness in some senses overlap, each term respectively manifests variance, such as in the distinction between public and private conscience dating at least to the medieval duo of *synteresis* and *conscientia*. “*Synteresis* defined one’s voice as the echo of an objective, communal voice,” explains Lowell Gallagher. “*Conscientia* articulated an internally persuasive discourse” (265). The eventual folding of both facets into one term contributes to the understanding by James’s era that conscience included both private and community-oriented aspects. James reflects this parallel in the shared ethical reverberations of individual conscience when Strether happens on Chad and Madame de Vionnet during their tryst in the French countryside. When Strether and Madame de Vionnet, unbeknownst to Chad, see one another, the divide between those who know and the one who remains ignorant becomes a divide not just of perception, but of ethics. What Chad does not see cannot affect him ethically; but, conversely, as Strether sees, his naivety vanishes: perception becomes fertile, creating ethical response and responsibility. This concatenation of perception and ethics intensifies the narrative’s focus on ethical matters, folding the reader’s perception of Strether inside Strether’s own ethically valenced perception, inviting the reader to join the train of ethical focalization and perception modeled by both narrator and Strether himself. While Austin Warren argues that here “Strether’s conscience has been educated, stretched, as far as it can go” (155) and Robert Garis objects that Strether’s realization, “far from being the crowning episode in his education, shows on the contrary that there has in fact been no education at all” (307), the gradation of conscience’s education is less important here than Strether’s recognition that his conscience, whatever its education and whatever the external moral pressure, must be—and is—his basis for ethics.

Moreover, portraying Strether’s mental processes through the metaphors or figures of active verbs in this scene, beyond livening the discourse, showcases the dynamic, creative possibilities of ethical thought. Strether’s perceptions frame the narrative account as evidenced by constructions in the first two paragraphs like “He had dreamed,” “He was quite aware,” and “He observed” (AB 319). More specifically, engaging in the isoperceptive focalization that Nieragden describes as the “personal identity of subject and object of focalization” (690), James’s narrator in the first four paragraphs of Book Eleven, chapter 3, deploys reflexive pronoun constructions in conjunction with verbs of perception and action: Strether “found himself” (319), “walked as if to show himself” (320), “saw himself partaking,” “lost himself anew” (321), and “asked himself.” In some cases, verbs like “found” or “lost” waver between perception and action: more ordinarily designating a physical action, they here refer to a mental process of imaginative fabrication.

The consciousness shared by Strether and Madame de Vionnet near the chapter’s close creates their reality, apart from Chad’s. Even when he joins in their knowledge, the reality of guilt and of Strether’s conscientious response to the couple has solidified. The deliberate pacing of this scene, Strether’s initial nonchalance in his sighting of the couple, even the narrative’s break between chapters at the very point of recognition, lessens the immediate impact. “Neither he nor we are outraged or morally discomfited,” writes Pippin. “He had been lied to, but, on the other hand, there was indeed a genuine, unavoidable ambiguity in the characterization ‘virtuous’” that Bilham gives to the relationship (150). These ambiguities persist into Strether’s more extensive mus-

ings that night: “He then knew more or less how he had been affected—he but half knew at the time” (329). This nocturnal ripening of realization, perhaps surprisingly, does not directly incite conscience, at least not the conscience readers might expect in Strether, for the scene and Book Eleven end in his reflexive ambiguity: “He found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things” (331). Neither Strether nor the narrator seem able to process the defiance of morality revealed in the recognition scene, collapsing instead on unspecified thought. James’s narration allows, however, that the recognition could have happened another way, or, more specifically, could have been seen another way. The sheer arbitrariness of Strether’s wandering on this “rambling day” (322) and the narrator’s description that he “found himself” (319) getting out of the train and “found himself” talking with a “stout white-capped deep-voiced woman” (322) imply that the perception might not—under other circumstances, specifically other narrative circumstances—have happened at all. And this shift in perception would have produced a different, or at least differently conceived, world.

As J. Hillis Miller proposes that the speech acts of *The Wings of the Dove* “take place not in the real world but in a substitute world” and that “The novel’s virtual reality has its own specific laws, limitations, and assumptions” (174), so the focalized and imagined world of Strether’s consciousness molds his own “laws, limitations, and assumptions” into the hardware of existence. While Strether’s conscience, deeply interiorized as it is, can hardly make claims on other characters, much less on readers, James’s narrative focalization makes it the command center of a new world, the nucleus of a new, narrative life form. His creation of knowledge and virtual reality by narrative focalization leads to, and in some way *is*, a creation of narrative ethics, suggesting the narrator as the principal *locus* of the novel’s ethics, as of its perception. And within this focalization, Strether’s further focus on his own actions and thoughts proffers a mode and model of interpretation and ethical response not just found, but forged, within the novel.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For more on the link between these figures through *Roderick Hudson* (1875), see Zacharias and Engelberg (*James*). Engelberg extends this work in a 1972 book which includes some discussion of *The Ambassadors* as well (*Distance*). For more general overviews of their connection, see Raleigh (chapter 1) or, more recently, Lustig. Beyond his allusive relationship to Arnold, James acknowledged Arnold as the person “that we think of when we figure to ourselves the best knowledge of what is being done in the world, the best appreciation of literature and life” (*EL* 730).

<sup>2</sup>For development and use of the term “focalization,” see Bal, Onega and Landa, Van Peer and Chatman, and, especially, Prince. Miller (“Focalization”) more specifically applies focalization to James, a contrast to Tilford’s pre-focalization view, like Booth (“Distance”), who offers yet another pre-focalization system of narrative perspective. Also especially relevant to this study is Cohn’s work on narrative and consciousness.

<sup>3</sup>See also Miller’s related work in speech acts and ethics, such as, respectively, “Speech Acts in ‘The Aspern Papers’” or *The Ethics of Reading*.

<sup>4</sup>Short and Watt mine even the most rudimentary of stylistic elements such as sentence length, sentence order, and parentheses as integral facets of James’s narration techniques. More recently, Eagleton similarly examines James’s “convoluted later style, with its bafflingly intricate syntax and extraordinarily mannered mode of expression,” arguing that this “is a way of trying to see an object from all angles simultaneously, weaving a linguistic web so close-knit and fine-grained that it allows no scintilla of meaning to escape” (223).

<sup>5</sup>I am thankful to Matthew Fellion for suggesting this point to me at the 2011 Narrative Conference. I am thankful also to Emma Plaskitt more generally for her encouragement in conceiving this project at Oxford in 2009.

<sup>6</sup>Miller incisively discusses the ethical possibilities of stichomythia in late James, identifying “those repetitive stichomythias that are so important an ingredient in the grammar of dialogue in *The Golden Bowl*” (*Literature* 230). More specifically in reference to this “highly puzzling renunciation scene,” Wilkinson

posits that James's "logic is difficult to follow, or accept, until we begin to see how much of the Kantian moral imperative is implicit in all of Strether's crucial decisions in the novel" (167).

<sup>7</sup>*OED: Conscience* (cf. the difference between I, "Senses involving consciousness of morality or what is considered right," and II, "Senses without a moral dimension." Also, as Warren's previously mentioned study provides helpful background on conscience in James's New England, Decker and Livingston offer insights regarding conscience in James's adopted England.

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